

THE ASSASSINATION
OF
MAHATMA GANDHI
& THE POLITICS OF BANNING THE
RASHTRIYA SWAYAMSEVAK SANGH

RAGHUVENDRA TANWAR



PUBLICATIONS DEPARTMENT
Akhila Bhāratiya Itihāsa Saṅkalana Yojanā
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Introduction



As the world joined India in mourning the death of Mahatma Gandhi the Government of India enforced a ban on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (4 Feb., 1948). A decision that has remained contentious ever since. The Sangh was charged for having encouraged communal violence but the ban was more for the Sangh's alleged role in the conspiracy that was said have led to the killing of Gandhi. The charges against the RSS were based essentially on the ground that the killers of Gandhi had links with the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. The investigations that followed however were unable to establish or bring to light any evidence to link the RSS as an organization with the crime.

The paper seeks to argue that with the exception of small isolated groups the RSS not only strongly disapproved the killing of Gandhi, but condemned it in the strongest

possible terms. It is further argued that keeping in mind the manner in which the RSS and the Indian National Congress had worked hand in glove during the peak days of violence in the Punjab and Delhi (1947), the decision and attempt to link the RSS with the assassination of Gandhiji appears to have been inspired less by the merit of the case and more by other considerations.

In the months preceding and following the partition of India, the RSS particularly in the Punjab and regions surrounding Delhi had caught the imagination of the masses. The main reasons for this were:

- a) The sacrifices made by RSS workers in protecting lives and fighting out the Muslim Leagues National Guard during the unprecedented violence that over-ran the Punjab.
- b) The disciplined and organized manner in which the RSS workers worked in the refugee camps that were scattered across the Punjab and Delhi. This was in sharp contrast to the corruption ridden Government machinery; the RSS was accepted as a major source of trust and support.

The paper draws attention to statements issued by key leaders of the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha following the tragic end of Gandhiji. Atal Bihari Vajpayee for example noted in his then recently started journal *Panchjanya*: '*yeh Bharat ki Atma ka patan hai*' (this assassination has killed the soul of India).

The *Organiser* a publication closely associated with the RSS and which was also sealed following Gandhiji's murder had noted in its first issue after it was allowed to restart publishing: "... the assassination is a misdeed of the undeserving sons of India... on this tragic and evil day truthfulness love and tolerance were dethroned and falsehood and intolerance usurped their place..."

The paper also draws attention to several statements that were issued in praise of the working of the RSS – these

include Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and of course Sardar Patel. Gandhi in fact had attended a function organized by the RSS in Gandhi's honour as late as in Sept., 1947.

It is based mainly on sources not cited on the issue hitherto, like *Panchajanya*, the *Organiser* and several important contemporary newspapers including – *The Times of India*; *The Tribune*; *Dawn*; *Statesman*; *Civil & Military Gazette* and the *Hindustan Times*. Important references have also been drawn from the correspondences of Sardar Patel and Dr. Rajendra Prasad.

1947 – Post Partition months: the political scene

In the months preceding Gandhiji's assassination the political scene and the law and order conditions in Delhi and the neighbouring regions were almost anarchical. With an unusually harsh winter, refugees - distraught, homeless and penniless had flooded Delhi. The capital as such was like one big refugee camp. In the Punjab with over 5,00,000 having lost their lives and millions displaced in a matter of months (1947), the conditions had no precedent in terms of the loss of life and property. As the violence burnt itself out in the Punjab, another crisis erupted in the Kashmir valley (Oct.-Nov. 1947). The country as we know found itself at war within months of its birth as a free nation. It was therefore only natural that there was anger, disillusionment and strife across the plains of north India.

B. Banerjee in a lengthy article contributed to the *Organiser* on Gandhi Jayanti (2 Oct.) 1947 drew attention as to why there was mass disillusionment and anger. He said that the widespread disturbances should not be seen as being anti-government or anti-Congress but as spontaneous expressions of anger prevalent among the people as a result of the anarchy and violence that was seen all around at the time.¹ This was

1. *Organiser*, 2 Oct., 1947.

more so because most people believed that they were victims of a mishandled political scene.

These were also in fact the days when several Sikh and Hindu organizations were demanding that the partition plan be taken to its logical conclusion. In sum this meant asking Muslims to vacate Delhi and its neighbouring areas so that the flood of incoming refugees could be accommodated. The demand was without doubt unreasonable. However, it was in fact more the result of the large scale violence and the loss of life and property and the influx of hundreds or thousands of refugee families that were moving from corner to corner in search of shelter.

Widespread corruption: 1947

Another issue that attracted widespread criticism in the early post partition months was the widely prevalent corruption and misuse of office by many of those who had suddenly come to occupy offices of power and prestige. Lionel Fielden was a close friend of several senior Congress leaders. He was in Delhi in August, 1947. In a series of lectures that were delivered over the BBC and later published as '*Four Talks on Pakistan*', Fielden wrote a chapter 'Congress and the people of India'. He noted with shock how senior Congress leaders had adopted the British system:

...it did seem to me a little surprising and odd that the Congress party should be living more or less under conditions of luxury and splendor which they were apt to criticize in the British... I was surprised to find so much criticism of it, the old accusations of nepotism and corruption and extravagance so familiar under the British seemed no less violent under the Congress...¹

1. I.M. Stephen's Papers, Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge.

Records of the time are filled with stories of how loot and corruption were rampant in Delhi and the Punjab. The proceedings of the first session of the East Punjab Legislative Assembly that met in Simla in November 1947 were termed by sections of the Press as a 'fish market' where stories of corruption and greed filled the debates.¹ The issue of widespread corruption also took up much time of the Constituent Assembly in the first week of December (1947). Members like Deshbandhu Gupta and Naziruddin Ahmad called for drastic action against the corrupt. Home Minister Sardar Patel too shared with the House stories he had heard about misuse of office and bribing of influential people. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee had also spoken strongly on the issue.²

The Congress sees the RSS as a threat

What is interesting in the context of the political scene at the time is also that the Congress seemed in common perception to be losing good will and support. This is not of course to suggest that there was any threat to its dominant position.

Somewhat in contrast to the image of the Congress was the widely prevalent impression with regard to the image of the RSS particularly in the Punjab, Delhi and surrounding areas. In the Punjab, the RSS was during the period of peak violence seen like a corner stone that withstood the onslaught of the Muslim League National Guard. By the level of its discipline and sacrifice exhibited during the crisis, the RSS had caught the imagination of the people to the extent that it came even to be perceived as a threat by many of those who were in political power in Delhi. With widespread corruption and mismanagement in the relief and refugee camps and the rehabilitation government machinery, the RSS had filled the gap by honest hard work, systematic relief and support. Besides the work of the RSS in the post violence days, during the peak of violence the manner in which the RSS countered

1. See *The Tribune*, first week of November, 1947.
2. *Civil & Military Gazette*, 6 Dec., 1947.

the Muslim League's National Guard and joined hands with the Akalis and even the Congress to save lives greatly added to its image in public perception.

Mahatma Gandhi praises the RSS

Interestingly Mahatma Gandhi had addressed a RSS meeting of about 500 people at the Valmiki temple in New Delhi on 16 Sept., 1947. He complimented the RSS for the work it was doing in the refugee and relief camps, its discipline and organizational ability. Commenting on the growing strength and influence of the RSS, Gandhi said: "any organization that was inspired by sacrifice was bound to grow".¹

A detailed report on this important event was written by Sudarshan for his column the Capital Jottings in the *Organiser*:

...Mahatma Gandhi had expressed the desire to address the workers of the RSS... There are known differences between Mahatmaji and the Sangh regarding the means and methods of serving the Motherland... but both seek to serve the country as best as they can...²

The same report also added:

...Gandhiji was accorded a hearty welcome. His address began with a tribute to the Sangh whose ideals of service and selfless work have been responsible for the success it has attained... (a) organization inspired and motivated by such noble ideas of service to the nation cannot do anything wrong...³

1. *Hindustan Times*, 17 Sept., 1947.
2. *Organiser*, 25 Sept., 1947.
3. *Ibid*

RSS Chief as first Vice-Chancellor of the East Punjab University

It is important to note that while some of the Central leaders of the Congress were opposed to the RSS, at the same time among the provincial leaders, who were clearly closer to ground realities, the tendency was to recognize and appreciate the working and contribution of the RSS. Often this was not in public, but it was there all the same. In the Punjab for example the RSS, the Congress and the Akalis through the summer of 1947 were virtually hand in glove. They were so indistinguishable that the Congress Premier (Chief Minister) of Punjab, Gopi Chand Bhargava was keen to appoint Rai Bahadur Badri Das as the first Vice-Chancellor of the prestigious East Punjab University. Badri Das was no ordinary person. He was head of the RSS in the Punjab. Bhargava was aware that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wanted the East Punjab University to be as good if not better than the erstwhile Punjab University (Lahore) which had now gone to the Pakistan side. Gopi Chand Bhargava's decision to select Rai Bahadur Badri Das was obviously based on the understanding that the decision would be well received, keeping in mind as it did the popularity of the RSS in Punjab and Delhi.

Gopi Chand Bhargava wrote a letter to Prime Minister Nehru on 14 Feb., 1948. This was in fact in response to an angry letter from Nehru. In sum Nehru appears to have questioned Bhargava as to why the East Punjab government had not done enough to contain the RSS. Nehru had also raised the issue of Badri Das's prospective appointment as Vice-Chancellor. Bhargava wrote to Nehru that no doubt he had about two months earlier discussed with Badri Das, the probability of his being made Vice-Chancellor. But now Bhargava added this had not been done and Justice Teja Singh had now been appointed. He also told Nehru that Badri Das was not arrested because he had now distanced himself from the RSS. This is surprising because, incidents of RSS members moving out of the organization were virtually unheard of. Obviously there

was more to it. What is of greater interest in this letter is the last para:

...I am sorry to find that some people give you entirely wrong reports about the situation in my province and they are unnecessarily worrying you and (wasting) your time. Please rest assured that so long as I am at the helm of affairs I will not allow anything to be done which might lower the prestige of the Congress...¹

Early move to ban the RSS

By about early November (1947) by when the violence had burnt itself out there was a huge propaganda campaign targeted at the RSS. Most of this effort was traceable to sections of the Congress leadership in Delhi. The main allegation being that the RSS had played a frontal role in the violence and had spread communal disharmony. This was surprising because as we have earlier noted, throughout 1947, that is till about October, on the ground the Congress and the RSS had worked hand in hand particularly in Punjab and Delhi. What is it then, that led the Congress to suddenly find fault with the RSS and highlight it's so called 'communal' agenda.

The Tribune, which was considered by Gandhiji as one of the most important views paper of the country reacted in an editorial to the political rumours that the Government of India was planning to ban the RSS. This was in mid Nov., 1947.

...Our staff representative at Jullundur is well informed and we are reluctant to doubt the authenticity and correctness of the report that Nehru wants the RSS and the Akali Dal to be banned and has issued a directive to the East Punjab Government...

1. *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol. 6, Bhargava to Nehru, 11 Feb., 1948, pp.39-40.

it is too bad to be true... it is the bounden duty of those who hold the reins of government in the province as representatives of the Punjabis to resist it with all their might... it is amazing that while the existence of far flung Muslim League organization in India with their secret arsenals replenished do not cause the slightest irritation to Panditji – the existence of RSS and the Dal which function as massive bull works against internal Pakistani sabotage cause acute pain and anger to him. Need we remind Panditji (Nehru) that but for the gallant resistance offered by these national organizations thousands more of Hindu and Sikh women would have been raped and slaughtered... when the west Punjab Hindus and Sikhs were burning and bleeding and the cry of the millions of oppressed elicited no better response from outside than a cry in the wilderness would do... their (RSS & Akali Dal) valiant members cheerfully laid down their lives... It might be true that some of them were involved in the disturbances... But then they were no more than worse... what we want to emphasize is that the RSS and the Akali Dal are protectors of people and enshrined in the hearts of the people.... Jinnah is building up his National Guard but Nehru instead of building up a powerful citizens defence force and absorbing the RSS and the Akali Dal is thinking of smashing it...¹

1. *The Tribune*, 26 Nov., 1947. This editorial was also reproduced by the *Organiser*.

The editorial stand of The Tribune was not in isolation nor was it a surprise. The RSS also had important people standing in its support. And these were people who were not associated with it. For example, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the philosopher statesman (later President of India) addressed a RSS camp in Rewa in Dec. 1947. He praised the RSS for its sacrifices and its hard work in the months gone by. But interestingly he also cautioned the organization and advised them to refrain from attacking the Congress.¹ Likewise Home Minister Sardar Patel while addressing a meeting in Lucknow virtually repeated what Dr. Radhakrishnan had said: “activities of the RSS had brought it in conflict with those who were in power in the Congress”. Patel in fact offered to intervene on behalf of the RSS, provided it stopped attacking the Congress.² Interestingly at about the same time Patel had also written to B.G. Kher, the Premier (Chief Minister) of Bombay, drawing Kher's attention to how some sections in the Congress were trying to exaggerate the political role and importance of the RSS.³ Incidentally Patel attracted much criticism during this period, particularly for his Lucknow speech in a section of the Pakistan press – mainly Dawn. Patel was repeatedly accused also for his soft corner for the RSS. Dawn even drew comparisons in his style of work and statements with Jawaharlal Nehru. The latter infact received frequent praise in the pages of the Dawn.

Lehri Singh was a senior Congressman and Public Works Minister in the East Punjab Government in 1947. While addressing the *Vijayadashmi Utsav* gathering in Jullundur he made some interesting observations on the RSS. He said:

...till some months earlier he had, had some reservations on the RSS and its work, but now after seeing the good work it had done, he had changed his views and was

1. *The Tribune*, 30 Dec., 1947.
 2. *Civil & Military Gazette*, 9 Jan. 1948.
 3. *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol. VI, Patel to Kher, 8 Jan. 1948.

now an admirer of the RSS...

The Tribune also reported:

...He (Lehri Singh) wanted the RSS to make itself known to Indian leaders so that misconceptions can be removed. Now that India was free every party had a right to organize... There is very little difference between the objectives of the Congress and the RSS... the Congress wanted to establish Hindustani Raj while the RSS wanted unity and progress...¹

When Lehri Singh pointed out that there was "very little difference between the RSS and the Congress", he did have a point. In fact even a publication like the *Organiser* which was closely associated with the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha and perceived by the Congress as enemy number one, had in an important editorial on the eve of India's Independence complimented the Congress for all its earlier work:

...The Congress has excellent record of public service. Most of its leaders have spent long years in prison and undergone suffering. They fought for the complete freedom of the country and one of the cardinal principles of the struggle was unity and indivisibility. Almost when they were about to reach the end of their labour it seemed as if a mental paralysis over took them, then they succumbed to the Muslim League... the Congress had the unquestioned support of 300 millions Hindus and other minorities except those that were represented by the Muslims

1. *The Tribune*, 30 Oct., 1947; *Organiser*, 30 Oct., 1947; also *Organiser*, 18 Sept., 1947.

League...¹

Mahatma Gandhi's murder – early political fallout

Gandhiji's death marked the end of a political era and the beginning of another.

As the world joined India in its hour of grief and mourning Gandhi's death, Delhi witnessed important political developments. As Master Tara Singh the fire brand Akali Dal leader and by far the most important Sikh representative stated in his autobiography, '*Mere Yaad*':

...Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead on 31st January 1948. When the news of his assassination reached me, I was then in Dharamsala where I had gone to recuperate after my illness. I returned from Dharamsala to Amritsar the very next day. The government launched a special propaganda campaign after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. As a result, the government which stood shaken at the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, began to find feet. The Congress gained immense strength...

It stands generally accepted that by about the time that Gandhiji was assassinated the Congress was virtually divided in the camps of Sardar Patel and Nehru. As a well received recent study has put it:

...The political fallout of the murder was that the Home Minister came under intense attack for the failure of the Police department which was under him to protect Gandhi. The Nehru loyalists in

1. *Organiser*, 14 Aug., 1947.

the Congress saw this, an opportunity to attack and weaken the iron man... It took a terrible toll both on Patel's political and physical health...¹

In New Delhi, Jayaprakash Narayan, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia and Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya jointly addressed a press conference on 3 February (1948). The three firebrand socialists created a sensation in Congress circles and other centres of power in Delhi by seeking the Nehru government's resignation.²

A reporter of the *Statesman* who had talked to some members of the Central Assembly a couple of days after Gandhi's assassination filed a report saying that many members were of the view that the tragedy could have been averted if timely action had been taken. In this particular report, the criticism was surprisingly directed more at Prime Minister Nehru than at Home Minister Patel.³ More generally the report also said that many members felt that if the problems that followed partition, particularly the refugee-related issues, had been handled well and in time, the clouds of bitterness that 'hung' over Delhi could have been avoided.

Attempts to link the RSS to the assassination

All through 1947 there were clashes and a war of words between the RSS and workers of the Communist party. These were particularly noticed in the Punjab and UP.

...Anti RSS feelings were first worked up in UP and then the Communists launched their full scale anti Sangh campaign during and after the disturbances in Delhi...⁴

The first planned agitation targeting the RSS as an

1. Tushar, A. Gandhi, *Let's Kill Gandhi*, pp.527-528.
2. *Ibid.* Also *Times of India*, 4 Feb., 1948.
3. *Statesman*, 4 February, 1948.
4. *Organiser*, 19 Aug., 1948.

organization for the killing of Gandhi was led by one P. Sundarayya a Communist party leader in Bezwada. In a statement he had charged the RSS, the Hindu Mahasabha and Home Minister Sardar Patel, for conspiring and for planning the killing.

This report of the *Madras Mail* (1 Feb., 1948) noted that the statement of Sundarayya, had attracted anger among a vast section of people. About 8000 people had gathered from across Andhra Pradesh. The Communist propaganda aggravated the situation and a clash broke out when a car carrying RSS volunteers was attacked, injuring some of them. Street fights were reported between RSS volunteers and the Communists...¹

About 2000 people gathered in New Delhi near Parliament House on 3 Feb. demanding a ban on the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha and seeking 'to drive out the enemies of Nehru'.² Almost as if in an organized manner similar protests took place in several parts of the country. In the Punjab small groups of left party workers were reported by *The Tribune* to have called for revenge: "one particular political group was trying to make capital out of the tragedy".³

The attempt to isolate and corner the RSS following the killing of Gandhi also had another fallout. For example on 1 Feb. 1948, P.V. Kane, Vice-Chancellor of Bombay University wrote a letter to M.S. Aney, Governor of Bihar :

...The tragic circumstances of Mahatma Gandhi's death are resulting in an inter-caste feud. There has been a vendetta by some people and goondas against the Hindu Mahasabha and Brahmans who are members of the Sabha. There have been burnings in several chawls where Brahmans live or where Hindu Sabha

1. Report of the *Madras Mail*, 1 Feb. 1948, reproduced in *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol. VI, pp.28-29.
2. *The Tribune*, 4 Feb., 1948.
3. *Ibid.*, 5 Feb., 1948

members are known to reside. The doors of the Brahman Sabha at Bombay near the Prarthanasamaj were broken open and the clocks were struck with stones and pots were taken out on the street and burnt. In other chawls there have been attacks by mobs against Brahmans and there has been firing by the police in several cases and many persons were injured and several killed in these two days. One does not know that what is going to happen as to this inter-caste feud. Even women have been assaulted and ill-treated. This is a new phase which was not present even during Hindu-Muslim riots. Unless Government takes strong measures in Bombay and Poona (where also there has been a good deal of arson) there is no knowing how far hatred and vengeance may proceed...¹

M.S. Aney then wrote to Sardar Patel requesting him to direct the police to ensure that innocent people were not harmed:

...news papers are full of harrowing tales of mob fury against certain sections of the people particularly the communities which are supposed to have inclination towards the RSS and the (Hindu) Mahasabha...²

Post assassination – Congress leaders meet for the first time

The Congress Legislative Party met for the first time after Gandhi's death on 4 February, soon after the Constituent Assembly had adjourned for the day as a mark of respect to

1. *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol. 6, pp.38-39.
 2. M.S. Aney to Patel, 10 Feb., 1948, *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol. 6, p.38.

Gandhi. Home Minister Patel spoke extempore for about 40 minutes. This address, as one report put it, was regarded by many members as his best ever. The Sardar broke down twice and for the two minutes that he took each time to recompose himself, there was pin-drop silence. Speaking brilliantly he said that, 30 security men in plain clothes were present in the gathering of about 500 people on the day Gandhiji was assassinated. He explained how the CID wing of the government had been greatly affected because over 80 per cent of its staff, which was Muslim or British, was no longer available and that work was being conducted with only 25 per cent of the strength of the staff.¹

Patel then took up the politically sensitive issue of banning the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. He said that such an action was not only against democratic principles but was bound to lay the Congress open to the charge of political vindictiveness. More importantly, he said that since even the Draft Constitution had already accepted the distinctive identity of the Muslims in India, the Hindu sentiment could not be ignored and that the need of the hour was to 'act firmly but with fairness', and to ensure that decisions were not taken under pressure from hysterical agitations.² He also talked of the good work the RSS had done during the disturbances, particularly in protecting women and children. He admitted that there were many 'fanatical and misguided elements in it'.³ Notwithstanding the tone and content of Patel's references to the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS, the Congress Legislative Party resolved to ban the RSS.⁴ This resolution of course was only a formality. It is almost certain that the decision had already been taken by the time the Legislative Party was asked to resolve on it.

Students of history have known all along that CID and Home Department's reports and also police reports are often doctored to suit prevailing political climates. At times as we also

1. *Statesman*, 5 February, 1948; *The Tribune*, 5 & 6 February, 1948.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *The Tribune*, 6 February, 1948
 4. *Statesman*, 5 February, 1948.

know contemporary reactions and opinions are often nearer to the truth and reflect events without the adulterations of biases and agendas that get planted in course of time.

It can be said that the manner in which the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha were dragged as organizations into the conspiracy that led to the tragic end of Gandhiji was in all likelihood based more on the urge to settle political scores rather than merits of the investigation that followed the crime. The misdeeds of a handful of fanatics were presented and propagated as if both the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha were planners of the crime and that every member of these organizations was involved in some of the other manner and therefore, was required to be arrested and detained.

The then young Atal Bihari Vajpayee was among the first to raise the issue. He wrote in *Panchjanya*, a journal started by him that by banning the RSS the government had been unfair and it was possibly a political conspiracy or perhaps sheer ignorance.

...Many in the ruling party know that the RSS had nothing to do with it (the killing of Gandhi) why are they not speaking out... is it not a crime to sleep over the truth...¹

In the very next issue the *Panchjanya* raised another interesting issue. It pointed out to the government that it was the RSS that brought to it's (the government's notice) a plan organized by the Muslim League to hoist the Pakistan flag on the Red Fort. The League is also supposed to have planned the kidnapping of senior leaders. In this sense the RSS had virtually saved the face of the government. This was said to have happened in September 1947. The article questioned: "Has the government now forgotten the (helpful) role of the RSS".

RSS is banned

The order for banning the RSS was issued in the evening of 4 February (1948). *The Times of India* quoting government sources

1. *Panchjanya*, Edit. Vol. I, No. 11, 2 Oct., 1948.

said it was the first step towards combating 'forces of hate and violence'. The *Civil & Military Gazette* said banning the RSS had been seriously discussed in government circles even in November 1947, but the view then was that the stage had not yet come for it to be banned as an organization.¹ The *Statesman* welcomed the ban in an editorial, adding however that there were other organizations too that needed to be banned and that the ban must also be seen in the light of reports which said the RSS possibly had a hand in the killings of Muslims in Punjab.²

Interestingly later when the huge investigating effort with full support of the Government failed to establish a link of the RSS with the killing, the *Organiser* noted in the context of what it called a premeditated bias among sections of the media against the RSS:

... now after the investigation government too have realized that the RSS had absolutely no connection with the murder... soon after Gandhiji's assassination we had expressed our view that many of our contemporaries (meaning the press) had done grave injustice to the RSS...³

As violent agitations were organized against the RSS in what was perceived widely as a planned exercise in many parts of India, the government sat back helplessly. On 6 February, *The Tribune* in an editorial 'Nehru Government must pause and ponder', strongly questioned the ban, and said that the move had clear political motives:

...The Nehru Government's position will be clearly questionable and untenable if it forges deadly repressive weapons and uses them freely against political parties and

1. *The Times of India*, 5 February, 1948; CMG, 5 February, 1948; also *Statesman*, 5 February, 1948.

2. *Statesman*, 6 February, 1948.

3. *Organiser*, 19 Aug., 1948.

organizations which happened to be opposed to its national and internal policies and moves... we request the Nehru Government to pause and ponder... instead of attacking parties whose outlooks is different from its own...¹

RSS responds to Gandhiji's assassination

The first response of the RSS to Gandhi's assassination came in the form of a statement by Hari Chand, *Sanghchalak* (principal Organiser) of the RSS in Delhi. He said: "it is a pity that some parties are trying to take advantage of this cowardly act by associating the name of the RSS".² A day later *The Tribune* (3 Feb.) quoted the RSS *Sanghchalak* of Bombay: "The persons arrested have no connection with the RSS". The All India Hindu Mahasabha Chief L.B. Bhopatkar took pains to explain that it was unfair and unjust to condemn or penalize the Mahasabha for the acts of some individuals. He called the act of killing Gandhi: "...as the most reprehensive act in the history of the world".³ The East Punjab Chief of the RSS, Rai Bahadur Badri Das also strongly condemned the tragic end of Gandhi. He also announced that all organizational activities of the RSS in the Punjab would remain suspended during the 13 day mourning period.

The list of senior leaders associated with the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha who came forth to condemn the killing is long. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, issued a strong statement: "The shot of the assassin not only vitally pierced through the mortal body but grievously struck the very heart of Hinduism".⁴ In another statement Dr. Mookerjee said: "the greatest Indian was done to death by a Hindu is a tragedy unparallel in history. That he was a member of the Hindu

1. *The Tribune*, 6 February, 1948.

2. *Statesman*, 2 Feb., 1948.

3. *The Tribune*, 4 Feb., 1948.

4. *Dr. Rajendra Prasad's Correspondence & Select Document's*, Vol. 8, p.415.

Mahasabha is a matter of shame and humiliation for every one of us connected with the Mahasabha".¹

Soon after Gandhi's assassination Atal Bihari Vajpayee published an article on the killing of Gandhi in *Panchjanya*. He said: "the assassin had killed the soul of India" — "*yeh bharat ki atma ka patan hai*". While calling for the rough investigation and justice it also said that:

...not only was the action anti India but had destroyed in a few second... the system of values that had been nurtured for thousands of years... even those who had differences with him (Gandhi) always found his presence conciliating...²

Panchjanya dedicated several editorials to Gandhi in its editions that followed Gandhiji's assassination. On two occasions a big photograph of Gandhi was published. On Gandhi Jayanti (1948) the editorial written by Vajpayee noted how Gandhi was held in great reverence and esteem across the world. It said that the values and norms followed by Gandhi were those that any true and worthy Hindu would aspire to follow. Vajpayee further said that Gandhi's biggest contribution was that in spite of difference, he was able to bring even his opponents onto one platform. Those who had differences with him were always only at the political level. Vajpayee said, one could have as many differences with him but once one was in his presence the differences disappeared.³

The *Organiser* a paper which was as earlier noted closely associated with the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha was sealed following the ban order on the RSS. It resumed publication in July, 1948. In its first post assassination issue (29 July) it said:

1. *Pioneer and Civil & Military Gazette*, 7 Feb., 1948.

2. *Panchjanya*, Vol. I., No. 6, 1948, Microfilm Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi.

3. *Panchjanya*, Vol. I, No. 11. Edit., 1948.

...the assassination (of Gandhi) is a misdeed of the undeserving sons of the land... on this tragic and evil day, truthfulness, love and tolerance were dethroned and falsehood and intolerance usurped their place...

On Gandhi Jayanti (2 Oct. 1948) the *Organiser* devoted another editorial to Gandhi, titled 'Father of the Nation'. In this it called Gandhi, "the greatest and noblest son India had ever produced". However it also raised another contentious issue:

...whoever was found lacking in faith in Gandhi's policy of Muslim appeasement was taken to be an accomplice in his murder plot. Newspapers that were critical of the policy were treated as places where the conspiracy was hatched - were sealed.... failing to see that the few misguided youth were not representative of the RSS...

The working committee of the All India Hindu Mahasabha had met on 14 Feb. in New Delhi. It resolved to support the government in its fight against terrorism and antinational activity. At the same time it also charged the Congress: "...has clearly opened itself to the charge of eliminating political opposition in the country..."¹

Sardar Patel on the involvement of the RSS

There are two letters written by Sardar Patel as Home Minister and one by Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee that require an extended reference in the context of the charges made against the RSS. The first by Sardar Patel is to Prime Minister Nehru dated 27 Feb., 1948:

...All the main accused have given long and detailed statements of their activities.

1. *The Times of India*, 16 Feb., *Statesman*, 15 Feb., 1948.

In one case, the statement extends to ninety typed pages... It also clearly emerges from these statements that the RSS was not involved in it at all. It was a fanatical wing of the Hindu Mahasabha... It also appears that the conspiracy was limited to some ten men, of whom all except two have been got hold of...

...Every item of information that is being communicated to us through sources, known and unknown, real anonymous or pseudonymous, is being investigated. More than 90 per cent of these have been found to be just imagination. Most of these have been directed to the activities of RSS men in various centres. We have followed this up, and except vague allegations that sweets were distributed or joy was expressed, hardly anything of substance has been found in them... I have come to the conclusion that the conspiracy of Bapu's assassination was not so wide as is generally assumed, but was restricted to handful of men who have been his enemies for a very considerable time – the antipathy can be traced right to the time when Bapu went for his talks with Jinnah, when Godse went on a fast and some others of the conspirators went to Wardha to prevent him (Bapu) from going. Of course, his assassination was welcomed by those (section) of the RSS and the Mahasabha who were strongly opposed to his way of thinking and to his policy. But beyond this, I do not think it is possible, on the evidence which has come before us, to implicate any other members of the RSS or

the Hindu Mahasabha. The RSS have undoubtedly other sins and crimes to answer for, but not for this one....

...As regards the RSS in Delhi, I am not aware of any prominent men or active workers whom we have left out. We hear all sorts of reports from somebody or the other regarding a certain person being an active member or not. In some cases, on such reports, arrests were made, and we soon found representations coming from the Congressmen themselves testifying to their Congress sympathies and anti-RSS views. We had to release them. In other cases, on arrests of RSS people being made on similar information, both we and the Provincial Government's are being accused of rounding up innocent people... I am assured that particularly all the important workers of RSS in Delhi have been rounded up. Indeed, some knowledgeable people tell me that we have rounded up more than necessary...¹

The second letter was addressed by Sardar Patel to Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee who at the time notwithstanding his Hindu Mahasabha grounding was an important Minister in the Union Cabinet - Industry & Supply. But first, the letter by Dr. Mookerjee to Sardar Patel. This letter was dated 4 May, 1948.

...My dear Sardarji, ... I wrote to you (and also spoke to Shankar, Patel's Private Secretary) about the detention of persons connected with the Mahasabha. Those who are suspected of complicity in the

1. *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol. 6, pp.56-57.

outrage on Gandhiji will no doubt be put up for trial. I understand (V.D.) Savarkar's name is being mentioned in this connection. I do not know what evidence has been found against him. I have not the least doubt that you will satisfy yourself that nothing is done which may give rise to the suggestion later on that he was being prosecuted on account of his political convictions... His sacrifices and suffering in the past have been considerable and unless there is some positive proof against him, he should not, at this age, be subjected to a charge of conspiracy to commit murder. I leave the matter to your decision...¹

The Sardar replied to Dr. Mookerjee on 6 May, 1948:

...My dear Syama Prasad, ... As regards Savarkar, the Advocate-General of Bombay, who is in charge of the case, and other legal advisers and investigating officers met me at a conference in Delhi before I came here. I told them, quite clearly, that the question of inclusion of Savarkar must be approached purely from a legal and judicial and political considerations should not be imported into the matter. My instructions were quite definite and beyond doubt and I am sure they will be acted upto. I have also told them that, if they come to the view that Savarkar should be included, the papers should be placed before me before action is taken... I quite agree with you that the Hindu Mahasabha, as an organization,

1. *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol. 6, pp.63-64.

was not concerned in the conspiracy that led to Gandhiji's murder; but at the same time, we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that an appreciable number of the members of the Mahasabha gloated over the tragedy and distributed sweets...¹

V.D. Savarkar

While this would not be the appropriate place to discuss the suffering and sacrifice of Savarkar in the cause of India's freedom, it remains important to know that when the news of Gandhiji's assassination was broadcast by All India Radio and he was informed of it, he was taken completely by surprise. The Kapur Commission that was investigating the murder noted in its report (25.167): "Kasar went and informed Savarkar, who said it was bad news and then kept quiet".²

Savarkar was a hugely important person in the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha but did not hesitate to differ on some key issues with the broader sentiment of the organization. When for example it was decided not to celebrate 15 August (1947) because of the partition of the country and the consequences that followed, Savarkar defied the ban and hoisted the national flag on the terrace of the Savarkar Sadan. The extremists in the organization in fact were very angry with him.³

Savarkar was charged as a conspirator in the murder of Gandhiji but later acquitted. The fact is he was outspoken and never hesitated to speak his heart out. With Nehru in particular he had serious ideological and political differences. While it would be unfair to suggest that the Prime Minister took special interest in trying to involve Savarkar in the murder conspiracy, the fact however remains that the two frequently crossed paths - the duel of words was always there.

1. *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol. 6, pp.65-66.
2. Tushar A. Gandhi, *Let Us Kill Gandhi*, p.903.
3. *Ibid*, p.147.

On Oct. 4, 1947 *Dawn* had quoted Nehru:

..The demand for a Hindu state was medieval, stupid and fascist... the real danger to India was not from Pakistan but from a section of Indians themselves..¹

It was these observations of Nehru to which V.D. Savarkar, reacted in a statement issued on 7th Oct. He said :

...In the nature of things neither the Gandhian ideals nor the pseudo-nationalist ideology of the Congress can ever cope with the Islamic offensive and the Hindu Sangathanist ideology alone will be able to fight out this danger. Vital interests of Hindus and Sikhs demand that some arguments put forward by Congress ministers should be promptly refuted... Nehru has of late been stating that right to retaliation belongs only to the state, but he forgets the practical aspects of his policy. What are people to do if the state proves unwilling or pusillanimous to defend its own people? What are thousands of people in danger of being murdered in cold blood to do? ...Hindu Sangathanists kept shouting from house tops of dangers ahead. But they were declared traitors, communalists and hunted out.... If Pandit Nehru and his colleagues are still safe they owe (it) to the brave bands of Hindus and Sikhs...²

1. *Dawn*, 4 Oct., 1947.
2. *Hindustan Times*, 8 Oct., 1947; *Organiser*, 9 Oct., 1947.

RSS refutes charges of fascism, communalism etc.

While Nehru and some other leaders of the Communist Party in particular frequently used the term 'fascist', to describe the RSS. The RSS on its part reacted strongly to the charge. The *Organiser* noted that:

...Nehru by talking of fascist tendencies in the country has tried to create an imaginary hare in order to hunt it...¹

It also said that it was unfair to brand the organization as fascist just because it had organized and trained its members with skills to defend themselves.²

A Memorandum submitted by four senior office bearers of the RSS to the Prime Minister, seeking withdrawal of the ban on the RSS in fact went to great lengths to answer the charges being made against the Sangh. This memorandum was submitted after the legal proceedings and police inquiries failed to establish any link of the RSS with Gandhi's killing. It was jointly submitted by Hansraj Gupta, Vasant Krishan Oak, Dharamveer and Narenderjit Sinha – all of the Delhi RSS. First it gave the history and nature of the organization's work since 1925 and then said:³

...The Muslim League and the Communist Press indulged in vilifying the RSS... other parties followed. It was probably because they thought the RSS to be a possible and formidable rival in the political field...

The Memorandum then took up each of the four major issues that the Congress was frequently charging the RSS with - being communal; being fascist; a private army; being against the government:

1. *Organiser*, Edit. 9 Oct., 1948.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

... we believe that any activity that creates hatred or ill will and wants to benefit one community at the cost of the other can be termed communal. RSS has never done this... Fascism is an un-Hindu cult based on semantic intolerance... RSS looks upon it with disdain. It is a method for attaining political ends which the RSS does not have in view... Both the Communists and the Muslim League being anti India and anti government conspired to weaken our people by causing a rift between the RSS and the government...

The memorandum also added:

...The spontaneous reactions of the RSS to this atrocious deed is evidenced by the telegrams expressing his sense of horror and feeling of grief sent by Shri Golwalkar to Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel and Devdas Gandhi... he issued telegraphic instructions to all provinces to suspend daily programmes for 13 days of mourning... he appealed to all for peace... all through the country the RSS maintained an extraordinary restraint in the face of the gravest provocation... If there was thinking of banning the body even in November, it could only have been by the fear caused by the rapid growth of the RSS all over the country... after banning the RSS and declaring it unlawful – Government... used its entire Congress machinery to rouse popular anger against the RSS... the allegations conceived in a spirit unworthy of a democratic government...

Another article published in the same issue which reproduced the Memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister, also questioned the whole exercise of banning the RSS. It questioned how the government had suddenly realized that the RSS was a threat to the country whereas just 3 weeks before Gandhi's assassination no less a person than the Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister of India had all praise for it:

...What were the grounds on which the RSS was banned. They were merely general grounds, which the government have not cared to prove. Is it sustainable in law that merely because a party or a section of the people, and a very major section for that is as is said against another party which is in power that it should be suppressed by recourse to law and ordinances. Is it democracy? ... if we examine the conduct of the Sangh and recollect the charitable views expressed by no less a person then the Deputy Prime Minister (Patel) on 9 Jan., 1948 in Lucknow we shall be certainly convinced of the bonafides of this organization and the patriotic inclination of its members...¹

Devdas Gandhi on the RSS

Devdas was Gandhi's youngest son and was married to C. Rajagopalacharya's daughter Lakshmi. He was close to his father, often helping him with paper work and engagements. A respected journalist he also later worked as Editor of the *Hindustan Times*. A week after his father's (Gandhiji's) assassination he spoke on the All India Radio. The address was reproduced in the press and truly sums up the basic approach and attitude of the RSS in the context of the tragedy

...there are people in the RSS and the

1. *Organiser*, 19 Aug., 1948.

Hindu Mahasabha who would have given their lives to save Gandhi... this applies to a vast majority of them... there are no more than a handful of individuals who are guilty of the crime...¹

1. *The Times of India*, 7 Feb., 1948.